



# The historiography of the British Communist Party

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*Kevin Morgan*

## The historiography of the British communist party: further considerations

In reviewing the recent historiography of the CPGB for this journal, I referred briefly to the ‘overblown language’ with which John McIlroy and Alan Campbell had been attacking other historians as if representing ‘baleful deviations to be annihilated’.<sup>1</sup> How accurate that was! At the time of writing, my own name had not figured among these historians. Now, however, I too find myself described as sweeping, assertive, closed, cryptic, diplomatic, evasive and given to opaque pontification – without even getting past page one of their alternative prospectus.<sup>2</sup> Deviations are in there too. Darkly it is hinted that we must ‘study the historian before we study his facts’, and that I once cited Maurice Isserman and twice contributed to the paper of the Democratic Left. Baleful deviations indeed!

Perhaps this is mere self-advertisement. The central complaint made of my article is of the absence of any detailed exposition and citation of alternative viewpoints. None of the other review articles in the same issue meet McIlroy and Campbell’s exacting criteria. Nor, notoriously, does their own ‘user’s guide’, referred to in the article, which has given rise to a number of responses documenting actual misrepresentation.<sup>3</sup> We can nevertheless agree that some limitations are inherent in a short review article, and McIlroy and Campbell’s objection is actually more specific: that I have not sufficiently ventilated their own views. No fewer than twenty-three of their footnotes refer to their own writings: some balance. If the ‘alert reader’ follows them up, references cited and suggesting a wider scholarship actually turn out to comprise further references to the same recent flurry of activity, as if they are caught in a hall of mirrors surrounded by a veritable crowd of themselves.<sup>4</sup> They literally do not complain of any other viewpoint omitted, saving a useful but rather slight and ill-researched ‘Trotskyist’ account (to use the term descriptively and without pejorative intent) published after I wrote my article.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the ‘balance’ demanded by McIlroy and Campbell refers exclusively to themselves, indeed, for unexplained reasons, to their comments and assessments in the past three years or so. We can check at a glance that in fact they are treated more generously than several more substantial contributions, not excluding my own.

Mere self-absorption, however, cannot explain the doggedness and personalised tone with which McIlroy and Campbell pursue these questions, or the way they link differences of view with sweeping allegations of professional incompetence. Apparently, their position is unambiguous: ‘our first concern’, they cite E.H. Carr, ‘should not be with the facts which it [the work of history] contains but with the

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Morgan, ‘Labour with knobs on? The recent historiography of the British Communist Party’, *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für soziale Bewegungen*, 27 (2002), 77.

<sup>2</sup> John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, ‘The historiography of British communism: an alternative reading’ [henceforth ‘Historiography’], **details**, (1).

<sup>3</sup> At least mine does; this reply is currently forthcoming in *Labour History Review*.

<sup>4</sup> For example, they reproduce their ‘own assessment’ that the work of Nina Fishman ‘has been subjected to detailed criticism’ – but this turn out to refer to ‘detailed criticism’ by themselves (‘Historiography’, 2). One of their favourite words is evasive and they also ought to look up deceitful.

<sup>5</sup> James Eaden and David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920* (Basingstoke, 2002).

historian who wrote it'.<sup>6</sup> What precisely can this mean? In this instance, the historian in question is one with whom they are intimately acquainted, for between 1999 and 2001 McIlroy, Campbell and I were collaborators on a major research project from which the first of a series of publications, which was to have included a joint monograph, actually appeared. In the early months of 2001 I indicated to McIlroy and Campbell that I preferred to produce a monograph independently of them, and while producing it could not allow them free access to the live version of the database they mention as containing the fruits of my own current research. These differences between us are irrelevant to any wider discussion, but they have given rise to a remarkable transformation of my academic standing with my erstwhile collaborators. Prior to that decision I am not aware of any negative comment that McIlroy and Campbell had ever made on my work.<sup>7</sup> Since that date I am not aware of any positive one. Unexplained by any plausible archival or intellectual development, it is a volte-face to compare with any in the CPGB's own history.

Carr cites the case of Oxbridge historians lamenting the decline of civilisation when they really meant that they had to do their own washing-up.<sup>8</sup> However germane this may be to the present case, the theme of whether personal pique can take on the guise of scholarship is not one that I wish to pursue here. Instead, McIlroy and Campbell have challenged me to locate myself as a historian within the development of CPGB historiography. Within the constraints of the space available, I will therefore provide a more individualised perspective on the CPGB's recent historiography, and incidentally demonstrate that all of the specific allegations and misrepresentations made against me are tendentious to the last degree.

First a word of context. When I began researching this subject in the 1980s, the literature was dominated by what McIlroy and Campbell describe as a 'two party' approach.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, there were accounts like Henry Pelling's sole one-volume history of the party, which literally claimed to describe how by the late 1930s the CPGB's 'transformation into a military apparatus of the USSR was all but complete'.<sup>10</sup> Unqualified and unsubstantiated, similar interpretations could also be found, along with revolutionary counterfactuals which Pelling obviously did not share, in a number of Trotskyist accounts. I am not sure that I have even referred to these Trotskyists as Trottskyists since, though it is true I could wish that some of them had been less obsessed with me! My objection to them in 1989 was that their work, like that of 'Stalinist' historians, was not evidence-based but began with a conclusion, which was also a political line, and with varying degrees of honesty and academic

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<sup>6</sup> 'Historiography', (3) and n. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Perhaps more generally too. As far back as 1998, McIlroy's alternative reading was: 'Recent work has often enriched our understanding by subverting the traditionally one-sided emphasis on formal politics and structure and by substituting for overarching models of democratic centralism more nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between International, party, members and the organisations in which they worked. It has replaced a sometimes unscholarly hostility with a critical empathy which only occasionally collapses into over-benevolence.' Jogn McIlroy, 'The British Communist Party: from world war to cold war', *Labour History Review*, 63, 3 (1998), 357.

<sup>8</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York, 1961), 149, citing A.J.P. Taylor.

<sup>9</sup> 'Historiography', 22.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party. A historical profile* (London, 1975 edn), 107.

McIlroy's describes such comments as only intended 'metaphorically', though he does not indicate the source of such insights.. Pelling's views on the matter are absolutely unambiguous. (See John McIlroy, 'Rehabilitating communist history. The Communist International, the Communist Party of Great Britain and some revisionist historians', *Revolutionary History*, 8, 1 (2001), 207.

competence tried to illustrate it from original sources. McIlroy now states that these historians ‘pass[ed] over without question’ the fact that policies were implemented in different ways according to different circumstances.<sup>11</sup> ‘Quietly but firmly’, they ‘would have’ said this and they ‘would have’ said that. No doubt McIlroy ‘would have’ too, but ‘would have’ is no good. There is no evidence of any such insight in their writings, and the only example McIlroy provides dates from the prelapsarian fantasy world which some fundamentalists have identified with the pre-Stalinist Comintern.<sup>12</sup> No such citations were provided for the Stalinist period, and if ‘dissidence’ was acknowledged it was only in the context of the discipline to which it gave rise. Specifically regarding Arthur Horner, all of these accounts posited a model in which communist trade unionists simply carried out a party line handed out from above, and all ‘pass[ed] over without question’ that this was not even true of the CPGB’s most important trade union figure. That the unreality of these accounts is now self-evident is wholly attributable to the so-called ‘revisionist’ scholarship which McIlroy and Campbell lean upon and yet traduce in the very same breath.

At the same time, by the late 1980s there had been published a number of those studies describing specific areas of communist activity which Haynes and Klehr regard as the hallmark of ‘revisionism’.<sup>13</sup> In Britain, Richard Croucher’s *Engineers at War* may be taken as an exemplary case. In the course of four hundred pages covering some of the CPGB’s most dramatic policy reversals it provides literally no discussion of the international links described by McIlroy and Campbell as the ‘primary’ and indispensable about the activists whom Croucher is discussing.<sup>14</sup> Instead, Croucher states that this was *not* primary, but rather that many of them joined and remained active in the CPGB ‘primarily on the strength of their trade union activity rather than the overtly political part of their work’.<sup>15</sup> It is simply baffling that McIlroy and Campbell should now anoint Croucher ‘an acclaimed historian of Communism “from below”’ while belittling Nina Fishman, another of their estranged collaborators, on precisely the same grounds.<sup>16</sup> ‘Our first concern should not be with the facts ... but with the historian who wrote it’.

McIlroy and Campbell’s current line is to identify my first book *Against Fascism and War* with this ‘two party’ approach.<sup>17</sup> It is an audacious claim, as the book’s explicit purpose, elaborated at some length, was precisely to break down this dichotomy. Focusing on a period found embarrassing by official party historians, the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939-41, the ‘core’ of the book was provided by what I called ‘the Party “line” in the narrow sense and ... its relationship to the fundamental and strategic objectives of the Communist Party’. On the other hand, I also stressed that ‘to consider the enunciation of the Party line by its leaders is inadequate without also considering its application ... in social and political contexts which were not laid down by Moscow and did conform neatly to dogmatic preconceptions as to the general crisis of

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Historiography’, (14) citing McIlroy.

<sup>12</sup> McIlroy, ‘Rehabilitating’, 206.

<sup>13</sup> Cited ‘Historiography’, 22.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Historiography’, 29.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Croucher, *Engineers at War* (London, 1982), 371-2.

<sup>16</sup> Alan Campbell et al, ‘The International Lenin School: a response to Cohen and Morgan’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 15 (2004), forthcoming. It would be tedious to point out that their assessments of historians like Croucher and Kendall rest on not a ‘shred of evidence’, which is simply another red herring.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Historiography’, (22).

capitalism'.<sup>18</sup> Exploring these issues through case studies within the context of an account going beyond the local and specific, the book at no point claimed that central party directives were simply 'ignored' – though some of them, by some communists, might have been – but that they had to be negotiated and applied, and that this was one of the main keys to understanding what communists actually did. 'The aim of this book is to incorporate this sort of perspective into a study focusing on the Party itself, as ... has yet to be achieved in a full-length work adopting a national perspective. The objective is not simply a history "from above", nor one "from below", but a synthesis of the two...'<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps this is what McIlroy and Campbell mean by 'total history'. 'Surely there is a need', they comment forlornly, a mere fifteen years late, 'to return to (sic) ... the integration of ... history from above and history from below'.<sup>20</sup> The hollowness and presumption of their current dismissal of my own contribution is compounded by the fact that Campbell, who was then already an established labour historian, fulsomely described it at the time as an important and even pathbreaking contribution by a non-party historian. It was, he said, a 'rich account', one 'based on a wealth of scholarly research', 'add[ing] significantly to our knowledge of the influences of international politics' on the CPGB and 'point[ing] the way for further research'. Campbell also invoked the concept of automaticity – not that I have ever expressed myself so crudely – which McIlroy and Campbell now depict as a 'straw man' (sic) conjured up by 'revisionists' like Andrew Thorpe. 'The depth and detail of [Morgan's] analysis marks a significant advance on ... the right-wing stereotype of Party members as Stalinist automatons blindly obeying Comintern *diktats*'. Naturally, Campbell did not even provide the proverbial 'shred of evidence' of this stereotype: it would be helpful if he did so now. In any case, he was, as he is now, perfectly well aware that these issues had not simply been 'passed over' as too banal to be worth remarking upon, but systematically expunged from the historical record. One would have a higher regard for his integrity were he to explain what must be one of the most abject somersaults even in communist historiography.<sup>21</sup>

In the fifteen years since the book was published, my writing on the CPGB has represented a consistent rejection of the two-party model, assisted by the accessibility of new archival materials, the greater sophistication of my own understanding and the insights which I owe to a series of collaborators. McIlroy and Campbell claim that I 'plead guilty' to an approach privileging the local, the specific, the short-term and the bottom-up, and keeping the party as a party in the background.<sup>22</sup> Having launched this enterprise with a book dealing with the Nazi-Soviet Pact, I followed it up with a biography of the CPGB's longstanding general secretary and leading political personality of the entire Stalinist period, Harry Pollitt. I'm not sure how many times McIlroy and Campbell describe me as 'evasive', whatever that is supposed to imply, but here was evasiveness of diabolical ingenuity given my denial of the relevance of politics to Stalinism. Not exactly waiting on events, mine was the first British account to make systematic use of internal party archives, including microfilmed materials

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<sup>18</sup> Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War. Ruptures and continuities in British communist politics, 1935-41* (Manchester, 1989), 9-10.

<sup>19</sup> Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, 10. Compare with Haynes and Klehr, cited 'Historiography', (22) for the two-party approach I am said to have adopted.

<sup>20</sup> 'Historiography', (22).

<sup>21</sup> Campbell in *Scottish Labour History Society Journal* (1990), 93-7.

<sup>22</sup> 'Historiography', (22).

from Moscow, and is impossible to reconcile with my supposed repudiation of political approaches to communism.

McIlroy and Campbell deal with this as they deal with any matter of complexity: they do not mention the book at all.<sup>23</sup> Nor, for example, do they mention the articles I co-authored concerning clandestine links between British and Finnish Bolsheviks or Rose Cohen, who was murdered in the purges.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, my continuing interest in the social and cultural themes is presented as a repudiation of the political. Rather than a ‘totalising’ history, I prefer to think in terms of the plurality of perspectives from which even a limited subject like British communism needs to be approached. No single account is likely to eschew the ‘social’ or the ‘political’, if we have to compartmentalise in this way, but the balance and forms of interaction between them will, rightly and legitimately, vary according to context. Hence the essay on Cohen is primarily about ‘politics’, and specifically Stalinism. Unsurprisingly, the enthusiasm of young communists for the quintessentially American art form of jazz does not lend itself to quite the same emphasis.<sup>25</sup>

In this respect, a good deal of nonsense has been talked about the adoption of *a priori* or essentialist approaches. McIlroy and Campbell have a view of Stalinism which predetermines their approach to any particular aspect of it on the basis that other commitments, identities and activities are always subordinate to this shared primary allegiance. A favourite word for it is ‘overarching’. Whether this view is right or wrong, it is silly to deny that it is, in some sense, a priori and essentialist. Hence, McIlroy and Campbell can critique my essay on jazz without any familiarity with the sources on which it is based, and could just as easily write the same critique of essays on other subject that I haven’t even written yet. (I am sure they have a file of them.) To put it as neutrally as possible, their observations are not evidence-based because they are committed to an overarching framework to which they believe secondary empirical issues are subordinate. To put it less neutrally, supposedly ‘total’ histories written from a single fixed reference point have tended in practice to be partial, dogmatic and reductionist, not merely in respect of the ‘social’, but of palpably ‘political’ facts that get in the way.<sup>26</sup>

Having pursued such a range of studies since the late 1980s, it should therefore be clear that I am not rejecting either the social or the political, the centre or the periphery, but rather the dichotomisation between them that was a feature of the

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<sup>23</sup> The fact that they *do* cite a slighter piece deriving from the biography suggests that there was nothing inadvertent about this omission.

<sup>24</sup> See Kevin Morgan and Tauno Saarela, ‘Northern underground revisited. Finnish Reds and the origins of British communism’, *European History Quarterly*, 29 (1999), 179-215; Kevin Morgan and Gidon Cohen, entry on Cohen in Keith Gildart, David Howell and Neville Kirk, eds, *Dictionary of Labour Biography* vol. 11 (Basingstoke, 2003), 31-9.

<sup>25</sup> Kevin Morgan, ‘King Street Blues: jazz and the left in Britain in the 1930s-1940s’ in Andy Croft (ed.), *A Weapon in the Struggle. The cultural history of the Communist Party in Britain* (London, 1998), 123-41.

<sup>26</sup> Hence, in an example of their ‘totalising’ method applied to a single individual, Arthur Horner, and a single year, 1931, McIlroy and Campbell omit to mention the ‘political’ fact that he contested the general election that year, more than doubling the communist share of the poll compared with two years earlier. ‘Political’ as this may be, it complicates the narrative they are trying to write, so that they do not even succeed in identifying the constituency correctly! See John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, ‘The heresy of Arthur Horner’, *Llafur*, 8, 2 (2001), 105-18. See also the comments below on the Lenin School.

centre-periphery debates to which I referred in my article. For example, in the *Opening the Books* collection, McIlroy and Campbell's opaque allusion to a sole contributor using materials from Moscow actually refers to my own contribution on the *Daily Worker*, in which no rigid division between 'social' and 'political' themes will be detected. As they generously acknowledge, I also stressed the need for comparable scholarship on the relations between the CPGB and Moscow and since that time have been working on a three-volume study, *Bolshevism and British Left*, pursuing such lines of enquiry as the social and political consequences of the CPGB's reliance on Comintern subsidies. If we are to use of language of essentialism, which McIlroy and Campbell alternately discountenance and fling about as a meaningless term of abuse, then this may be regarded as a rejection of the competing essentialisms of 'Anglocentrism' and 'Moscow-centrism', of 'Britishness' or 'Russianness', and of historical debates in which they were constructed as alternatives. Compared to when I began writing in the 1980s, it seems to me no longer necessary to insist upon either side of the equation. Even former Trotskyists are now rebranding themselves as libertarian socialists, and I am glad that they feel they must do so; I also hope that they meet the litmus test of libertarian socialism, which is a full critique of Bolshevism and of the anything but libertarian politics of Lenin and Trotsky.<sup>27</sup> In the meantime, as nobody any longer thinks it fitting to describe themselves as either a Stalinist or a Trotskyist, it does not seem unreasonable to describe the sectarian debates in which these movements had had such a stake as intellectually exhausted. Very likely there is also a generational factor here. It is ridiculous of Campbell, whose own work is distinguished by the recognition of this factor in social and political movements, to describe any reference to it bearing upon himself as 'ageist'.<sup>28</sup>

Regarding the writings of Fishman, Thorpe and Worley, if given the opportunity they are well able to reply for themselves. On the specific allegation of my own inconsistency towards them, though this hardly bears out the suggestion of a common 'revisionist' discourse uniting us, it is also entirely untrue. In the case of each of the books referred to by McIlroy and Campbell, the reviews I have written mix recognition of their achievements with reservations as to methodology or interpretation which are wholly consistent with my article in *Mitteilungsblatt*. The notion that such assessments can include areas of intellectual difference within a framework of mutual respect is seemingly precluded by a reductionist, two-camps mindset. Three times – they are nothing if not repetitious – McIlroy and Campbell state that I 'praise' the work of Thorpe for reigniting the centre-periphery debate.<sup>29</sup> These are historians who puff out their chests and teach their students 'that unsubstantiated assertions made in the course of critique breach intellectual ethics'.<sup>30</sup> It is invidious to pick out this sole example of their method, but *where* do I praise Thorpe for reigniting this debate? What single word of laudation have they identified?

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<sup>27</sup> The signs are not encouraging. In the so-called 'Users' guide' (35) McIlroy and Campbell dismiss the 'crude essentialism which asserts that Bolshevism automatically led to Stalinism' (the 'automaticity' straw person) without specifying which elements in Bolshevism did nevertheless tend in this direction, and whether or not they included the militarisation of labour, suppression of the Kronstadt mutiny, the 'defence of terrorism' against social-democratic Georgia, the use of political show trials and the consignment of Mensheviks to the 'dustbin of history'. I do not of course imply that this is 'evasive' of them.

<sup>28</sup> 'Historiography', (24 n. 72).

<sup>29</sup> 'Historiography', (8, 9).

<sup>30</sup> McIlroy and Campbell, 'Is CPGB history important? A reply to Harriet Jones', *Labour History Review*, 68, 3 (2003), 386.

What particular branch of ethics justifies the linking of a purely descriptive phrase to this effect with the otherwise unevidenced notion of ‘praise’. My review of Thorpe’s book is accessible to any reader. In it I outline three principal reservations concerning his approach: its location within the centre-periphery debate; the underplaying of ‘external stimuli’ in periods like *Class Against Class*; and its provision of ‘the view from the Moscow archives’ at the expense of ‘a broader context and range of sources’.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, both in the review and in the article, I warmly commend Thorpe’s achievements, and very rightly so. As I have never rejected the study of politics *per se*, Thorpe does not of course stand for ‘everything Morgan opposes’ in communist historiography, nor I imagine did Thorpe have me in mind as ‘tak[ing] the politics out of political history’. Perhaps when they are still alive, McIlroy’s mystic ‘would have’ mode can at least be left for those involved to decide for themselves.<sup>32</sup> In any case, the point is that intellectual differences do not, or should not, preclude a recognition of the contributions made by other historians, still less their evaluation on the basis of whether one agrees with their ‘conclusions’, or political line, on something like *Class Against Class*. For the record, my Pollitt biography contains the first, albeit partial, account of the genesis of *Class Against Class* in Britain based on internal archives, and its interpretation is, as McIlroy and Campbell indicate, rather different from that of Thorpe, though less that of Worley.<sup>33</sup> I also have indicated differences of views on key issues with historians like Raphael Samuel, Brigitte Studer, Claude Penetier and Bernard Pudal, to name just a few of those whom I also recognise as outstanding scholars. If McIlroy and Campbell are suggesting that any comparison can be made between the contributions of Pudal or Matthew Worley and those of Eaden and Renton or Hugo Dewar, then they have abandoned academic criteria altogether and with it any notion of academic pluralism.

## Ways forward

“‘The way forward’”, [Morgan] insists, is “to draw upon the richer methodologies of the ‘new’ social history to explore the indigenous roots of communism in its diverse social, cultural and political milieux.”<sup>34</sup> Fastidious as ever in their intellectual ethics, McIlroy and Campbell thereby represent as my prescription for future research what is actually my characterisation of an existing body of literature which I trace from researches carried out in the 1970s. The irrelevance not to say inanity of their comment that the ‘new’ social history is no longer new follows as a matter of course. So emancipating is the credo of focusing first on the historian and only secondarily on the facts that McIlroy and Campbell are then able to provide a preemptive critique of an account which has not even been published yet, on the basis of an avowedly partial and preliminary version of one of its sources. They further bluster their way through the case I made for comparative methodologies by providing what purports to be a critique of an article referred to in one of my footnotes. These criticisms may briefly be considered as exemplifying McIlroy and Campbell’s libertarian ethics, allowing

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<sup>31</sup> *Socialist History*, 23 (2003), pp. 99-102.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Historiography’, (9).

<sup>33</sup> At least on the basis of his published work. For some unexplained reason, McIlroy and Campbell place a greater weight on his unpublished doctoral thesis, which I have not read.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Historiography’, (21).



me to conclude with a restatement of the common ground which even they are forced to occupy for fear of otherwise falling over.

To begin with the attempted demolition of the article I wrote with Marco Santana. This reminds me of the story I read my children, of the big, bad wolf who huffs and puffs and bears his teeth, but doesn't actually succeeding in blowing anything down. Though one would hardly guess it from the summary allegedly provided, our comparison of the Brazilian and British communist parties was expressly confined to similar tensions we had independently identified between industrial activists and the party apparatus in periods of legal trade union activity. Though a general historical context was sketched out, no consideration was given to issues without any direct bearing on the subject, such as the failed Brazilian putsch of 1935, and thirteen of the article's eighteen pages were devoted to setting out nine possible factors or variables which we argued might provide the basis for further comparative work. These are as follows.

- (1) 'the inclusiveness or factionalism respectively of a country's dominant union confederations';
- (2) 'notions of a separate or even superordinate industrial sphere' deriving from 'the syndicalist traditions on which both parties initially drew';
- (3) 'involvement in entangling alliances that exercised or aspired to government responsibility' and in which 'the communists' industrial cohorts were very much a bargaining counter';
- (4) the political somersaults that 'threatened to set communists apart from broader milieux' and 'attempted politicisation of immediate industrial issues';
- (5) the 'exaltation of mere will-power and organisation [which] continually stoked unattainable ambitions that, translated into party directives, produced non-compliance through their very impossibility';
- (6) the effectiveness or otherwise of 'cadre formation' and communist political education;
- (7) wide variations in the capacity of oppositional communist parties to exercise patronage and discipline;
- (8) class and gender tensions affecting relations between leadership and rank and file;
- (9) the survival of particularist identities or language differences in strongly regionalist or ethnically divided societies.

The article was presented by ourselves not, as alleged, as a systematic comparative analysis, but as a 'modest' and even 'schematic' presentation, albeit drawing on a wide range of original sources. As such, it suggests lines of enquiry which could usefully be pursued in comparisons of the British, German, French, Swiss and other European communist parties. McIlroy and Campbell do not engage with these suggestions. Nor do they dismiss them. They dwell in any detail on only one of the points, and misrepresent it to the point of demonstrable untruth.<sup>35</sup> While stating in

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<sup>35</sup> Thus ('Historiography', 26) McIlroy and Campbell dispute our supposed identification of an 'undifferentiated and undefined syndicalism' with communist union leaders like Arthur Horner and suggest that 'economism' is a preferable, if still imperfect, term. The paragraph they refer to actually reads: 'like economism, [syndicalism] provided a ready shorthand for supposed shortcomings that were continually being reproduced by the ambiguity and unreality of the party's own expectations. In this

general terms that my ‘uncorroborated assertion’ is ‘invariably evasive or inaccurate’, McIlroy and Campbell do not in fact identify a single inaccuracy.<sup>36</sup> In future, they need to set themselves the same standards.

In the discussion of the prosopographical database with which their article concludes, a wayward critique degenerates into farce. There is, though their ‘attentive reader’ appears not to have noticed it, no reference to a database in my article. Instead, a footnote refers readers to the prosopographical study on which I was originally to have collaborated with McIlroy and Campbell, of which they have not had sight of any part. Here the ‘would have’ mode is taken to the point of actual prophecy, for McIlroy and Campbell take issue with alleged ‘assertions’ of mine on the basis of what is explicitly described as a preliminary version of the database, further restricted by considerations of confidentiality, and providing only one of the sources of the study in question. McIlroy and Campbell state that the database contains references to 837 British communists. The actual figure is nearly 5,000. Using source-led methods of data collection, we have relatively fragmentary information for around half of these, and relatively full profiles of the other half, in most cases derived from life-history testimonies or the CPGB’s ‘cadre’ or biographical files. I hold that these are ‘unrivalled biographical sources’, and McIlroy and Campbell do not state the criteria by which they regard them as anything else. For example, Pamela Graves’s important study of women labour activists draws on a survey of a hundred of them.<sup>37</sup> William Knox’s analysis of Scottish Labour activists, based like ours on an ESRC-funded project, cites seventy-six examples.<sup>38</sup> Stephen Yeo’s influential account of the early British socialist movement mentions forty-six.<sup>39</sup> Which other comparable studies, we need to be told, mention eight hundred individuals, let alone six times that number?

Now we are caught deep inside McIlroy and Campbell’s looking-glass world. Naturally, even a survey of 5,000 members omits at least ninety-five per cent of the possible entries. Even where we have the greatest density of coverage, the figure is around eighty per cent. Therefore there are omissions: McIlroy and Campbell list twenty-five of them *by name*. Most exercised no political responsibility above branch level. At least one was never a communist. Several are actually on the database we used. Even so, the bigger question is left unanswered: why stop at twenty-five names when there are another 94,975 (est.) which could be provided? The sheer illiteracy of their comments is unbelievable.

A database is not a magical device but a collection of data whose validity, like that of any other body of evidence, depends on how it is used and whether claims based upon it are commensurate with the range and quality of this information. Quantitatively

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modified sense, syndicalism [remember: ‘undifferentiated and undefined’] thus became identified with just one of its characteristics, that is, its indifference to political organisation. ... Horner’s was a distinctive transmutation of this syndicalism, emptied of its intransigence and hostility to officialdom ...’ For the records, McIlroy and Campbell have themselves since characterised Horner (‘The heresy’, 118) as for most of his political life taking ‘what the Comintern and the CPGB of 1931 would have seen as the sinful path of syndicalism if not of prostration before social fascism’.

<sup>36</sup> ‘Historiography’, 28.

<sup>37</sup> Pamela Graves, *Labour Women. Women in British working-class politics 1918-1939* (Cambridge, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> William Knox, ed., *Scottish Labour Leaders 1918-1939* (Edinburgh, 1984), 15-57.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Yeo, ‘A new life. The religion of socialism in Britain, 1883-1896’, *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1977), 25-7.

speaking, my colleague Gidon Cohen has developed a variety of statistical techniques to overcome the biases inherent in a mixed-methods database, particularly those stemming from missing data and the lack of a representative sample.<sup>40</sup> We have also identified subpopulations like executive members and Lenin School students and worked up the entries upon them. Qualitatively speaking, not only does the data include tens of thousands of words of verbatim testimony, but in the monograph referred to we have used it in conjunction with a still wider range of sources and secondary literatures. To give just one illustration: McIlroy and Campbell refer to our work being based upon just thirty-one communists identified as being Jewish. In fact, the database we have used identifies 117 such individuals. These in turn provide just one source for the relevant chapter in our book, 'The Alien eye', which includes, *inter alia*, fifty references to our own project interviews, twenty-four references to other oral interviews, forty-three references to the Comintern archives and twenty-eight references to the CPGB's personal or cadre files. We are confident that when the book appears, commentaries by McIlroy and Campbell will be neither *ad hominem* nor a priori in character. Even so, they do really need to wait until the book actually appears before again demonstrating their singular largeness of mind and freedom from personal rancour.

In the meantime, they have, as they indicate, co-authored an attack upon our account of British students at the Lenin School. This, along with our reply, may be recommended to anybody who really needs a fuller induction into their methods of work.<sup>41</sup> We have carefully documented their propensity towards misrepresentation and categorical mis-citation. We show that their handling of both quantitative and qualitative evidence is incompetent. We demonstrate that the alternative data which they produce, without actually analysing, turns out to confirm the very conclusions which, on no proper evidential basis, they claim to refute. In particular, we demonstrate quantitatively and by use of a matched sample than *in the longer term* (a signal qualification, which they now wholly omit) Lenin School students were no more likely to be advanced to key leadership positions within the CPGB, and if anything less likely.<sup>42</sup> We also show that they are oblivious to any comparative context, within which the relative lack of political prominence or longevity of this cohort is abundantly clear (consider only Honecker). McIlroy and Campbell claim to be restoring the missing politics at the heart of communism. We demonstrate that a historical methodology whose Cobbett-like sophistication is epitomised by their capitalisation of the word MOSCOW leaves no analytical tools to describe political processes that cannot plausibly be traced to FOREIGNERS. Instead, they attribute leadership changes in this pre-eminently political party to the wholly depoliticised and intellectually threadbare explanation of mortality and (this is an actual quotation) 'life itself'.

It will be clear by now that relentless negativity towards particular historians, let alone former collaborators, can be achieved only at the expense of consistency, coherence and intellectual self-respect. Hopefully, enough has been said to show that if historians don't reply more often to McIlroy and Campbell it is because they advance

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<sup>40</sup> For a preliminary discussion see Gidon Cohen, 'Missing, Biased and Unrepresentative: the quantitative analysis of multi-source biographical data', *Historical Methods*, 35:4 (2002), 166-76

<sup>41</sup> *Twentieth Century British History* (forthcoming, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> The four cases which McIlroy and Campbell refer to are illustrative and even they cannot be boneheaded enough to suggest that these represent the quantitative dimension of the research.

no new ideas, require continuous correction on matters of basic fact and transcription and vulgarise every serious argument they claim to engage with. I want to end with a last illustration. This concerns my seemingly banal statement that membership of the CPGB represented a ‘voluntary, terminable and negotiated relationship’, to which McIlroy and Campbell react with synthetic wonderment, writing: ‘The twenty-one points which formally bound its affiliates to accept the instructions of the Comintern executive ... are simply removed from history by this remarkable stroke of revisionism’.<sup>43</sup> To make only the most obvious comment, it is not at all apparent how these twenty-one conditions prevented anybody from leaving the CPGB at any time in its existence. Still the argument seems perfectly clear – were it not that a goldfish-taxing six pages later, it is stated as ‘the central fact’ of CPGB history that ‘British Communists freely willed the leadership of the Comintern and internalised its political hegemony’.<sup>44</sup> Central fact? Freely willed? What on earth are we to make of this? Fully functioning control mechanisms, let alone the twenty-one conditions, were merely ‘secondary’ and ‘ancillary’; Moscow’s domination was the product of ideological legitimacy; so it goes on, one slash of revisionism after another. I said that McIlroy and Campbell had borrowed a good deal of ‘revisionism’ without even realising it, and here it is as clear and beguiling as the twinkle in Lenin’s eye.

Perhaps there is way forward here after all. I do not for a moment agree with McIlroy and Campbell’s formulation. Though research underlines the importance of the Soviet dimension to British communism – nobody has ever described this in terms of ‘a few shibboleths and eccentricities’ – it also underlines the importance of the diverse and multiple relationships in which communists were involved. Croucher, in the end, was right about this: often why people joined, remained in and regularly left the party was not primarily to do with Russia. If we want to get round the centre-periphery dichotomy, we need to understand that the balance between these different elements varied, and that these variations can be traced over time and in relation to social constituency, areas and levels of political responsibility or formative cultural and political influences. Rather than being counterposed to instruments of control, if we are seriously interested in politics, these variations also need to be traced in relation to the institutional and disciplinary mechanisms by which the Comintern set such store. In a word, the relationship needs to be historicised.

This is why a prosopographical approach is so important. If these voluntary, internalised commitments were so central, they must provide one of the main keys to understanding communist activism. Seventeen years ago, when heinously I cited Maurice Isserman, it was precisely to this effect: not so much that Pelling wondered how it came to pass that British communists could ‘sacrifice themselves so completely’ to Soviet Russia, but that histories like Pelling’s left us none the wiser as to how this *did* come to pass.<sup>45</sup> With McIlroy and Campbell it is precisely the same. At their crudest, it is impossible to see how this action of the free indigenous will can be explained if the ‘national terrain’ – presumably including these acts of will – is approached as something of an intrinsically secondary order, requiring ‘accommodation and tactical adaptation’.<sup>46</sup> Even in their stronger contributions to the literature, what is missing is any sense of agency or specificity as regards this largest

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Historiography’, (6).

<sup>44</sup> ‘Historiography’, (12).

<sup>45</sup> Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, 8.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Historiography’, 29.

and most central of their generalisations.<sup>47</sup> No explanation is offered of *how* this Stalinism was internalised or *why* it should have been so, and why those who did make the commitment fall into such distinct and uneven patterns, nationally, internationally, according to sex, occupation, family background, social class, and of course over time. Whether we identify it wholly with the belief in a workers' utopia, or whether that is located within a more wide-ranging, sophisticated and better evidenced account, this voluntary, freely willed and therefore terminable and negotiable relationship is evidently the key.

Moreover, if these issues are not just socially but politically central to the understanding of communism, then the ultimate taboo is breached, that in significant ways communism in different countries and localities will have been shaped by these determinants in different ways opening up the possibility of genuine comparison. Nobody, as far as I know, has ever referred to British exceptionalism, and to refer the recognition of difference as if inevitably involving some form of *Sonderweg* is no more than the proverbial straw person. Instead, borrowing from Max Gluckmann's notion of multiplexity, we have tentatively suggested a possible typology of communist parties whose political as well as social characteristics varied according to the range of alternative forms of association in which communists were involved. In the case of Britain, a thinly spread membership subject to relatively limited impediments to participation in broader social and political movements made for a variety of competing forms of association contrasting in obvious ways with the multiplex world of the communist counter-community. Putting entirely to one side any differences of leadership and political culture, this may explain the relatively pragmatic approach which the party in Britain took towards the discipline and political oversight of its membership.

It may also explain the relatively high levels of interaction in Britain between communism and social democracy. Once again, nobody has ever claimed that the CPGB 'was essentially Labour's left wing': McIlroy and Campbell again appear incapable of accurate citation.<sup>48</sup> What I did draw attention to is 'how densely interwoven the life histories of communists were [in Britain] with the broader cultures of labour and the radical left, whether this be through family and personal associations or shared values, aspirations and forms of activity'.<sup>49</sup> In the fuller study we have written, the claim is qualified, periodised and substantiated. McIlroy and Campbell are entitled to produce alternative data or contest the significance of these interconnections. If they can also develop the skill of accurately transcribing and representing the views of other historians, there is no reason why the debate should not be a productive one.

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<sup>47</sup> See for example Campbell and McIlroy, 'Miner heroes: three communist trade union leaders' in McIlroy et al, *Party People, Communist Lives* (London, 2001), 143-68.

<sup>48</sup> 'Historiography', (29). The reference is clearly to the Labour Party.

<sup>49</sup> Morgam, 'Labour with knobs on', 83.

